

Bard of Banality – William McGonagall, Poet and Tragedian

by

Michael Murphy

First published in

MD Magazine

December 1989

Bard of Banality – William McGonagall, Poet and Tragedian

I wasn't sure for a time whether *Poetic Gems* was a total hoax, but the uncertainty never prevented me from enjoying it. After all, it was a book written by the greatest writer of bad verse of his time, or probably of any other time. As it turns out, the book's author, William McGonagall, "poet and tragedian," was for real, though you'll hardly believe it once you've sampled the stuff produced by this deliciously wretched bard. Yet his *Poetic Gems* has come, minimally, through an astonishing 11 printings from 1890 (the first date in my edition) to the most recent that I know of in 1961 — and various individual gems have been included in anthologies.

According to the brief autobiography affixed to the *Gems*, McGonagall was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1830. He grew up in Dundee, where he became a hand-loom weaver, a Shakespeare addict, and an aspiring actor—though he burdened himself with neither training nor acting company.

In the Public Eye

His ambition to go on the stage was finally — if briefly — gratified when a local theater owner agreed to cede him his theater for one night in return for a pound. Thereafter McGonagall largely confined himself to entertaining the clientele of public houses, not with the inimitable Shakespeare, but with his own all-too-imitable verse. His experiences in pubs left him with a deep suspicion of pub owners: "I must say that the first man who threw peas at me was a publican"[a pub owner] — a memorable first in any man's life. One reason for the publicans' hostility was, he says, the teetotal bent of many of his poems, even "The Rattling Boy from Dublin." That was a favorite with audiences, probably because it came close to fulfilling some of their prime expectations for verse: it had a definite rhythm, it almost scanned, and had a popular, easy-to-recite chorus that went, "Whack fol the da, fal de darelido."

The verse writing had started in 1877, when at the age of 47 he suddenly discovered himself to be a poet. This revelation occurred, as he put it, one day in "the balmy month

of June, when trees and flowers are in full bloom, while lonely and sad in my room.” That’s McGonagallian *prose*. Wait till we get to the verse, which the flame of “divine inspiration” kindled in him.

Within a year his fame as a poet had spread so much that he received from some prankster an “invitation” to visit Queen Victoria at Balmoral Castle, the royal summer residence in Scotland. Off he went on foot, taking several days over the miserable journey, never doubting the invitation’s authenticity. He displayed it confidently to the gatekeepers, but they roughly rejected him.

He probably got the money for his next adventure from some Scottish patriot who felt the poet should be transported to the colonies. At any rate, he departed for New York on March 10, 1887. (McGonagall is the devil for names and dates in poetry or prose.) Shrewdly assessing the philistine suspicions of the New York immigration officials, he said when he arrived and was questioned about his trade that he was a weaver — “Whereas if I had said I was a poet, they wouldn’t have allowed me to pass.” They would have been right, too, it seems, for there was little demand in the New World for his talent. So he got some other transplanted Scotsman whose patriotism must have been totally transferred to his new country to pay his fare back to Scotland.

But he did not forget New York, and repaid his cool reception with a tribute — of sorts— to the great city. This has to be quoted at some length in order to impart the proper flavor of McGonagallian verse:

*Oh mighty city of New York, you are wonderful to behold
Your buildings are magnificent, the truth be it told,
They were the only thing that seemed to arrest my eye
Because many of them are thirteen storeys high.
Then there’s the elevated railroads, about five storeys high
Which the inhabitants can hear night and day passing by...
And all along the city you can get for five cents
And, believe me, among the passengers there are few discontent.
[O yeah? 0 tempora! 0 mores!]*

And Brooklyn Bridge is a very great height

*And fills the stranger's heart with wonder at first sight
But with all its lofliness, I venture to say,
For beauty it cannot surpass the new railway bridge of the Silvery Tay.
And with regard to New York and the sights I did see
One street in Dundee is more worth to me*

*And, believe me, the morning I sailed from New York
For Bonnie Dundee, my heart was as light as a cork.*

Take that, New York! Take that, Brooklyn Bridge! The infinitely superior bridge over the Silvery Tay (McGonagall could not separate the appellation “Silvery” from the Firth of Tay) had already inspired two unreservedly appreciative poems before McGonagall even laid eyes on the Brooklyn Bridge. Here is McGonagall on something he *really* liked:

*Beautiful railway bridge of the Silvery Tay....
I hope that God will protect all passengers
By night and by day
And that no accident will befall them while crossing
The Bridge of the Silvery Tay.*

This prayer may have been too much for the Deity's aesthetic sensibilities, for He certainly refused to grant it: the great bridge was blown down in a storm “On the last sabbath day of 1879 / Which will be remembered for a very long time.” I did say McGonagall was a devil for dates; they rhyme with all sorts of things.

“The Tay Bridge Disaster” portrayed with delicious horror the destruction of the bridge, but even in the face of this calamity the people reacted, he tells us, with exemplary British sang-froid:

*The cry rang out o'er the town:
Good heavens, the Tay Bridge is blown down.*

And there is, of course, a moral to this terrible tale:

*The stronger we our houses do build
The less chance we have of being killed.*

The new Tay bridge presumably stayed up, but there were many other disasters that McGonagall would seize upon with relish for he was even more fond of disasters than he was of dates. At least six of his effusions celebrate deaths or funerals; seven are devoted to sea wrecks; and one to an execution — not to mention merely by-the-way catastrophes. In fact, the late 19th century proved a rich vein for any poet with tragic leanings. There was, for example, the 1865 wreck of the steamer *London*, which ran into a storm — at

teatime — in the Bay of Biscay and inspired this complex tale: One passenger, Gustavus Brooke, “*quickly leaped from his bed / In his Garibaldi jacket and drawers without fear or dread.*” His valiant efforts at the pump were in vain, however, and ladies beautiful and rich

*Went down with the ship to the bottom of the sea
Along with Gustavus Brooke, who was wont to fill our hearts with glee
While performing Shakespearian tragedy.*

What Gustavus was doing in bed at teatime we are not told.

Then again, there was the death of the Reverend A.H. Mackonochie, who died while on an apparently futile convalescing visit to the Bishop of Argyle

*Because for the last three years his memory had been affected
Which prevented him from getting his thoughts collected.*

There were, too, battles old and new to be celebrated — particularly when, as in “The Battle of El Teb,” commemorating an 1884 victory in the Sudan, the British commander showed brilliant tactical skill:

*General Graham addressed his men,
And said: If they don't attack us, we must attack them.*

Further back, there was that occasion dear to the hearts of all true Scots, the battle of Bannockburn in 1314, where Robert Bruce defeated the English King Edward II. The Scots knelt in prayer before joining battle, a gesture the English king misunderstood:

*And he felt o' erjoyed and said to Earl Percy
“See, see! The Scots are crying for mercy.”
But Percy said: “Your majesty need not make such a fuss.
They are crying for mercy from God, not from us.”*

Nor did McGonagall neglect political personalities and events such as the death, in 1865, of Prince Leopold I, “Who was manly in his actions and beloved by his mother / And in all the family she hasn't got such another,” or contemporary notables like John Ogilvy, the member of Parliament for Dundee, who showed his regard for his constituents:

*Especially in erecting an asylum
For imbecile children to spend their days.
Then he handed the institution as free
As a free gift and a boon to the people of Dundee.*

Less prominent but also deserving was Hanchen, “The Maid of the Mill.” One Sunday while the family was at church, local thugs went after the miller’s money. With courage and ingenuity, Hanchen trapped the robbers and saved the miller’s property.

*And for her bravery she got married to the miller’s son,
And Hanchen on her marriage night cried: ‘Heaven’s will be done.’*

Amen.

At the end of the *Gems* comes a poem that displays most of the predispositions and qualities of this great poet and tragedian: “The Pennsylvania Disaster.” It deals with scenes of genuine horror during the 1889 Johnstown flood, which McGonagall describes in the best graphic detail he can manage. He leaves the reader, as I shall, with this poetic display of intelligent compassion:

*Oh heaven,! It was a horrible sight which will not be forgot
So many people drowned and burned, oh hard has been their lot.
But heaven’s will must be done I’ll venture to say.
And accidents will happen until Doomsday.*

END